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The Current Price Situation, 1997

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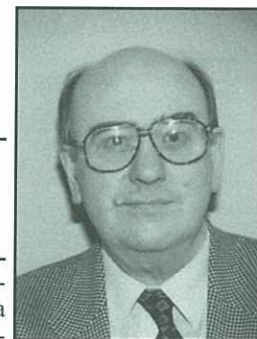
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Circulation Autumn: Some Thoughts on Forty Fulfillment Years

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This paper looks back at some of the people and events which influenced academic journal publishing in the past 30-40 years and how this may affect our futures. It was presented at the 1997 Charleston Conference. - KS

I have had the good fortune to visit the United States for the last 25 years, during which time I have made more trips to New York than to old York. I have also visited Birmingham, Alabama, and Boston, Massachusetts, more often than I have visited Birmingham or Boston, England, for reasons which you will understand. For a decade or so I have enjoyed coming to Charleston, for your Conference and for many other reasons. I enjoy history and architecture and my birthday is at the time of the Conference, a fact that I kept a secret until last year when my old friend, **Bob Miranda**, let the cat out of the bag. I remember speaking at the Conference some years ago and as a reward Katina Strauch gave me a magazine article about Guy Fawkes, the Gunpowder Plot and fireworks night. 5 November is also the date of the death of **Robert Maxwell**, for whom I worked for over 30 years at Headington Hill Hall.

I began my working life in 1951 as a booksellers' apprentice for **B.H. Blackwell Ltd.**, Broad Street, Oxford, at a salary of 78 Pounds Sterling per year. One began in a humble way, carrying piles of books from one floor of the bookshop to another and shelving them in the appropriate department. On my very first day I was too ambitious about the

quantity of books I considered I could carry and dropped one complete pile on

the staircase while ascending from the ground floor to the first floor. A grey-haired old gentleman in his sixties was very sympathetic and helped me to pick the books up and carry them to the next floor. This was my very first meeting with **Sir Basil Blackwell** who was to live for more than another 30 years, dying at the age of 94.

I spent five years with **Blackwell's**, the latter part working in their subscription agency, which later indirectly, led to my joining **Pergamon Press**. Also in the 1950s I spent two years in the British Army which was the Cold War tradition in those days. The Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry paid me One Pound Sterling or eleven German Marks per week for my services. I

was too late for the Korean War and spent my army service in Germany performing in numerous mock battles where the enemies were friendly Americans and Canadians. I did not meet a Russian and never saw a shot fired in anger. This was perhaps not very relevant to my career in bookselling and publishing except that when I later met Captain Maxwell it helped me to understand his rather autocratic management style for he had learnt his impressive command of the English language, and much else besides, during World War II.

The international scientific research journal grew out of the innocent optimism of the post war years. Before the War most academic journals were published by national and learned societies and were almost exclusively devoted to papers published by their own countrymen. The name **Elsevier** is derived from **Lodewijk Elsevir** or **Elzevier** (1547—1617) of Leiden, who was the founding father of a printing and bookselling business which flourished in seventeenth century Holland. He was born 450 years ago in 1547 and his first printed book bore the date 1583. His sons later opened further bookshops in The Hague, Amsterdam and Utrecht and the dynasty lasted until 1712. They produced editions of the Latin classics including Caesar, Pliny, Seneca and Virgil, as well as contemporary works by Descartes, Erasmus, Galileo, Hugo Grotius and Daniel Hensius.

The modern Elsevier publishing company began in 1880 when a Rotterdam bookseller, **Jacobus George Robbers**, together with

four business partners, founded a new publishing company using the Elsevier name out of respect for the highly regarded

printed books produced by the Elsevier family during the Dutch Golden Age. The first Elsevier scientific journal came much later when *Biochimica et Biophysica Acta* commenced publication in 1947. It cost \$9 per annum, post free, and first made a small profit in 1954.

Butterworth-Springer, founded in 1948 to import **Springer Verlag** publications into the United Kingdom, was acquired by its Manager, **Robert Maxwell** in 1951 and renamed Pergamon Press. His acquisition included *Spectrochimica Acta*, first published in 1939 by Springer, published in the Vatican City during the war and acquired as part of the Pergamon deal from 1951. Scientific journals for the first time began to attract research

papers from scientists over a wide geographical area and as their circulation increased in the 1950s and 1960s, became truly international for both authors and readers. To begin with this was largely a European phenomenon, but it soon became the norm to have a co-editor in the United States. Today many journals published by international publishers are edited by U.S. scholars. At one time every new Pergamon Press journal began with the three words "International Journal of," and although largely true, it was a bibliographic nightmare for librarians. Over fifty of these international journals still appear in our 1998 list.

I worked continuously for Pergamon Press at Headington Hill Hall from 1960 to 1991 when it was acquired by **Elsevier NV**, but with the constant changes in the company it did not feel like working for the same business, since change was the order of the day. Maxwell was everywhere; he seldom remained in one location for more than a few days at a time. He was quite capable of re-drafting a telex message from me to a colleague in our New York office and also assisting that same colleague with his reply to me during his next visit to the USA, a few days later. Like **Basil Blackwell** he loved to personally sort the incoming mail immediately when it arrived.

Furthermore, since long-range planning covered the period until next Wednesday he had no difficulty differentiating between what was important and what was urgent in his company. His office, with the possible exception of the large marble entrance hall, was the largest room in the building. His desk was arranged diagonally in one corner of this rectangular room with the door in the opposite corner of the longest wall, with the result that when you opened the door and approached his desk you traveled across an acre of carpet before coming face to face with your employer. If you knew the answer to his first question you would be offered a chair and a cup of coffee, otherwise you would be left standing for the duration of the session. He perhaps went completely mad in the end, but in the early days he was a most stimulating man to work for; you felt you were at the center of the world and you never left his office without the adrenalin running faster.

In 1960 we published fifty-nine journals and over the next thirty years this list was to grow tenfold, while journals expanded in size and frequency, separated into parts, were

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combined with other titles, changed their aims and scope and occasionally ceased publication. We probably dropped at least 200 titles in thirty years, very few of which disappeared altogether. One of the tragedies of this period was that journals which for good intellectual and commercial reasons should have died a natural death, were often taken up by other publishers and given a further lease of life. My thirty years with Pergamon perhaps covered the rise, the triumph and the beginning of doubt about the role of the print on paper international STM journal.

Many of the best stories about **Robert Maxwell** are apocryphal but one funny experience I remember personally. One of the important reasons why **Pergamon Press** made profits was that it was run on a shoestring; all of the office furniture at Headington Hill Hall was made personally by one resident carpenter who made all the desks and cupboards and also designed Mrs. Maxwell's kitchen in his spare time. In the days before the electric typewriter when there were no wires to worry about, he built desks with typewriters screwed to their underside so that when space was at a premium the typewriter could be stored upside down under the desk and the working surface used for other purposes, writing, proofreading or eating your lunch. Maxwell loved to show this invention to visiting authors and editors and would suddenly appear and say to a member of staff, "make your typewriter disappear," at which the employee would demonstrate this new piece of furniture. On one occasion, however, this little drama occurred with a relatively new member of staff whose desk was not one of the latest design. His desk was surrounded by a group of visitors and he was commanded in a firm voice to demonstrate the facility by making his typewriter disappear. He looked open-mouthed at the group of visitors who were anticipating this small miracle and then not knowing what to do, he picked up his typewriter and ran from the room leaving a colleague with the appropriate equipment to complete the demonstration.

Although Pergamon Press had a U.S. subsidiary company from the 1950s, most of the expenses were committed in Pounds whereas our books and journals were sold in North America in U.S. dollars. For a period in 1914 there were seven dollars to the pound sterling but after the First World war this fell to four and I remember that as a small boy we usually referred to five shillings (a quarter of a pound sterling) as a dollar. By 1945 the US dollar had replaced the pound sterling as the world currency and from 1950 to 1985 the US dollar was the benchmark against

which all other currencies were measured. As British and other European journals grew in size and frequency so the costs and subscription rates grew when expressed in pounds, but since during this period the pound fell in value almost continuously against the US dollar, this was not apparent to librarians in the USA, who saw only the illusion of stable prices. This factor perhaps more than any other made **Robert Maxwell** rich.

Windfall profits was not the whole picture however. Pergamon was a very "hands on company," where we worked long hours and often performed more than one role.

"[Not-for-profit publishers] is perhaps an unfortunate phrase which has fueled a dishonest dialogue which is more about patriotism than business practice."

Fortunately, as the company grew, the increased workload was largely covered by improvements in the commercial use of mainframe computers. Initially however with a small team, I set the budgets, prepared the price lists, mailed the renewal notices and then proceeded to collect the revenue, service the subscriptions and manage the distribution of the products.

Over the last 40 years there have been momentous changes in publishing and in the manufacture of books and journals. Hot metal has been superseded by offset lithography, the copy typist by the photocopying machine, the typewriter and the telephone, by the personal computer. There were, however, some apparently mundane things in fulfillment and distribution which also contributed to change. When I first joined Pergamon Press in 1960 the fulfillment and distribution records of the fifty-nine journals which were already being published were maintained on 80 column ICT punch cards with a separate tray of punch cards for each journal. Even if a library subscribed to all fifty-nine, we would have been quite unaware of it. These cards were used both as the clerical record and also a means of producing dispatch labels, invoices and renewal promotion. The accounting was fairly primitive; codes were used for each price, one year, two year, direct or through agents etc.; and could only be accounted for at the end of the year by counting the packs of cards on a sorting machine and then adding up the totals with a mechanical adding machine, but if you do it this way you remember it. I retained the journal code numbers, prices and the circulation levels in my head very easily, whereas now we have sophisticated computers to help us but we can never be absolutely sure that the data they provide is totally accurate because no one understands the business in sufficient detail to argue against the records provided in this wonderful way. In 1968 we converted the separate records for each journal into a computer-based system giving the addresses

of subscribers and a record of all the journals requested by each subscriber. I believe this was the first time this was ever done although it is the way that almost all publishing companies now operate. The idea occurred to me because I had previously worked in a subscription agency where manual type-written cards were retained in this sequence. Alas, I think this was probably my only completely original contribution to the industry in 40 years.

Much later, in the 1980s, subscription agents and journal publishers began to experiment with machine-readable orders particularly with regard to annual renewals for journal subscriptions. A committee was formed consisting of the major international agents, **Blackwell, EBSCO, Faxon, Swets**, etc.; and some of the leading journal publishers. A Standard was published in November 1989 by the Joint Serials Committee which later became **ICEDIS, International Committee on Electronic Data Interchange for Serials**. The original work with magnetic tape orders operated during the short window of the renewal season each year but has more recently been extended using File Transfer Protocol (FTP) to cover all subscription orders throughout the year. Journal dispatch data, to assist in the handling of claims for missing issues is now provided daily by EDI by some journal publishers. Work is also in progress to provide subscription rates annually by EDI to avoid the troublesome job of updating this data each

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year by keyboarding the new information into the essential rate and title files maintained by subscription agents.

Last year (1996), Elsevier Science amalgamated the fulfillment records of journals from five operating companies and created a central fulfillment department which now distributes over 1,100 journals. This was made possible largely by modern IT techniques and the splendid cooperation gained from subscription agents who moved from providing machine-readable orders to five sites to one in the period of a few months.

The pound was devalued from four dollars to 2.8 dollars shortly after World War II, but thirty years ago, in November 1967, the British government made a further devaluation. In those days most currencies did not float but were devalued, or less often revalued, as a matter of government financial policy. This latest devaluation occurred after Pergamon had mailed its 1968 subscription price list. The US dollar prices remained as they had been set, but there was a feverish activity to issue new price lists with appropriate letters of explanation in all other markets. Different explanations were required because in those days there was a sterling area in which Australia and New Zealand also traded in pounds and many other countries tied their currency to the pound sterling and consequently devalued at the same time. Our action gave the company a windfall profit while the revised prices did not result in higher subscription rates for most of our subscribers. In the 1960s circulation levels grew by 5—10% each year, not in financial terms, but in the number of subscriptions sold each year. I was sometimes in trouble with my employer, not as one would expect for failing to achieve the targeted sales, but for exceeding the targets, therefore being criticized for setting the target too low and having collected more revenue than I had budgeted. Not a problem that

journal publishers have to deal with in the 1990s when attrition makes it unlikely that they will sell as many copies next year as they were able to achieve this year.

It was many years however, before each new journal began to make a contribution to profit and even when they did there were the losses from the set up years to be covered. Consequently, companies which succeeded tended to publish a large number of journals so that the established journals could support the new products during their formative years. Nothing succeeds like success and in publishing it is very difficult to break even — you either lose your shirt or become very successful indeed. This has led to a debate about commercial publishers and “not for

profit” publishers. This is perhaps an unfortunate phrase which has fueled a dishonest dialogue which is more about patriotism than business practice. Whether stockholders or society members enjoy the profits of a successful enterprise, does not seem to me to be an ethical issue. Furthermore, as time went on commercial publishers worked closely with learned societies and many journals which were started independently by commercial publishers became the property of learned societies. On the other hand, many learned societies operated successful publishing programs in much the same way as the so-called publishers did, although they usually enjoyed more splendid premises and perhaps paid higher salaries. When in the mid-1980s the U.S. dollar ceased to be a benchmark which it had been for some forty years and the true costs and prices of STM journals became apparent, British publishers came in for a great deal of criticism in this country whereas previously they had been held in high regard. The real problem is that academic journals will never be inexpensive because they sell in very small quantities compared with popular publishing. If an STM journal sells 2,000 copies internationally, it is extremely successful and many sell only a few hundred. Only popular science journals with wide general appeal have circulations substantially higher than this.

Everyone's problem about collection development and funding is that as information grows and collections become larger, more money is needed. Funding authorities seem unwilling to recognize this rather obvious fact. If from tomorrow all publishers were able to provide their books and journals free, I believe academic libraries would still be in trouble a decade from now as the cost of housing and circulating this material rose in excess of the rate at which their budgets grew. As we train more academics they carry out more research and write more ma-

“We no longer live in a world of relatively small publishing companies where the owner/manager was personally known to all his staff.”

terial without necessarily increasing the budgets for the purchase of such material by the libraries of the world. If research is not published, however, and the work is unknown it is of no benefit to other research workers. Unfortunately, however, like higher expenditure on new roads, it simply attracts more vehicles and creates a further crisis of resource funding. In the early 1970s we thought that microforms were likely to play a significant role in journal publishing. I remember planning a fulfillment and distribution system which retained parallel circulation figures for print on paper and microfiche. I need not have bothered; the microfiche subscriptions were never significant and what records there were could have been maintained on a

manual card index system. For a time, however, microfilms of back issues proved a useful space-saving and profitable activity. It seems difficult now to understand the view held at that time that a more sophisticated form of microfilm would replace the printed word. With hindsight, however, true electronic publishing and its threat to print on paper did not become a practical proposition until some twenty years later.

I have often corresponded with librarians about the problems caused by changes of journal title which occurs too often, mainly because an editor feels that his subject has changed over the years and the original journal title does not fit the current state of his field of research. When a title changes, librarians all over the world need to register it and often have to move their stock. I understand all this but it does not impress scientists who have strong feelings about this and since it is their subject, change is often necessary. Both the Elsevier and Pergamon imprints, however, contain a sprinkling of journals with classical Greek and Latin titles, several of which have been published for over forty years and have never changed their titles even though the research published in these journals has moved in new directions. Perhaps there is something sacred about a dead classical language. After a successful campaign by **Chuck Hamaker** and **Marcia Tuttle** and other members of the American library community in the 1980s, most European publishers now sell subscriptions worldwide at one price. Perhaps less well known in North America is the action which the **German Library Association** referred to the **Commission of the European Economic Community (EEC)** in 1989, Britain being subject to the Treaty of Rome since it joined the EEC (now the EU) in 1973.

The 1989 Pergamon Press Subscription Price List contains three groups of prices, the lowest price set for the Americas in US dollars, a somewhat higher price for Britain and Ireland expressed in pounds sterling, and the highest price expressed in German marks which applied to all other countries. Subscribers in the Americas were asked to remit in US dollars but in other countries renewal invoices were rendered in German marks and its pound sterling equivalent, giving subscribers or their agents the option of remitting in either currency. The lowest price for the Americas was justified by the current weakness of the dollar at that time, but domestic prices for Britain and Ireland were lower than those extended to the other countries of the European Community which infringed the Treaty of Rome with regard to competition and differential pricing. Case IV/32.390 being a Statement of Objections 5 June 1989, was responded by Pergamon Press plc in a document dated 6 October 1989. This document contained 100 pages of text and several more hundred pages of documents and exhibits to support the defense. The charge was Dominance and Abuse: the Charge of

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Dominance could be answered since Pergamon published only some 500 journals against many thousands of STM journals in similar fields. The charge of Abuse with regard to differential pricing could only be answered by pointing out that the differential between American and European prices was being reduced as the dollar strengthened again each year and by agreeing to phase out differential pricing altogether, which we did. The company was not fined but it faced a huge bill in legal fees for the defense. Pergamon subsequently sold at one price worldwide, but for three consecutive years (1987—1989) Pergamon journals were sold in North America at prices lower than those prevailing in other countries. It is perhaps ironic that differential pricing is still applied by many academic publishers in the USA when supplying their journals to foreign subscribers (1998).

The most interesting few days of my life were spent briefing the barristers who represented our case in London and in Brussels before a German lady judge who presided on behalf of the European Commission. The matter ended amicably but led to one worldwide price with all the advantages and disadvantages of such a policy. American librarians had also campaigned for one price being under the impression that the North American price was always the highest, which as you can understand from my remarks, was not necessarily the case.

Following the acquisition of Pergamon Press by Elsevier in 1991, I have worked for **Elsevier Science**. Alas, there are no outrageous characters here; it is a world of dedicated specialists directed by an oligarchy, but I will always be grateful to Elsevier for saving my job and my pension rights when the **Maxwell Communication Corporation** collapsed. The company continued as Pergamon Press Ltd. But in January 1994 the name of the UK company was changed to **Elsevier Science Limited** and in March of that year the company moved from Headington to a new purpose built facility in the village of Kidlington some five miles from the center of Oxford. Although the Pergamon imprint remains, the name over the door is Elsevier Science Limited.

Headington Hill Hall was in turn acquired by **Oxford Brookes University** after the former UK polytechnics were upgraded to universities in 1992—1993. The bronze bust of **Robert Maxwell** has long since been removed from the Headington Hill Hall and replaced by a memorial to **John Brookes**, the first Principal of the **Oxford College of Technology**, which in turn became the **Oxford Polytechnic** and which is now the University named after him. He was also the Principal of the **School of Technology Arts and**

Crafts which I attended from 1949—1951; in the period immediately before my first meeting with **Basil Blackwell**.

Elsevier NV joined the **Reed International PLC** in January 1993 to become **Reed/Elsevier** and is in turn scheduled to become **Reed, Elsevier, Wolters Kluwer** in 1998. We no longer live in a world of relatively small publishing companies where the owner/manager was personally known to all his staff. Bob Maxwell with his 20 internal telephone lines linked to each of his department managers is a thing of the past. Current developments will, however, ensure that high quality publications will continue in a changing and perhaps more challenging world.

I remember standing in the arrivals hall

“... academic journals will never be inexpensive because they sell in very small quantities compared with popular publishing.”

at the Charleston airport in November 1991 looking for confirmation that my baggage had arrived on the same airplane as myself. I had been traveling to our office in New York State and also visiting subscription agents and had not found time to watch television or read a newspaper for several days. **Buzzy Basch**, who had arrived on another plane, waved at me and said, “Did you know that your old boss has fallen off his boat?” Maxwell’s yacht, his helicopter, his Rolls Royce and his profits had often been topics at previous Charleston Conferences, and it seemed almost in character that his untimely death had been reported in time for yet another Charleston Conference. I am sure that you will all go on remembering the late **Robert Maxwell** at Charleston long after you have forgotten me; I hope so anyway because he was a fascinating character who had a profound affect on modern scientific publishing, not all of it bad.

What about the future? Most electronic journals are currently versions of print products. Can we now confidently forecast that print on paper will move to networked electronic products. Will electronic journals become established as the preferred method of publication and how will we deal with peer review? The timescale is unfortunately the thing that no one can prophesize with accuracy. The apparent demand for electronic products will require huge investment and no foreseeable profit since while print on paper continues in parallel with electronic products, it is like using both electricity and gas to heat the same room at the same time.

Prices have increased as research journals have grown in size and frequency; institutions have learned to purchase less journals while spending more money on other services and are now seeking out electronic products to partially replace print on paper books and journals which have served us well for over 500 years. Even the journal has a

history of well over 300 years since several date from the second half of the seventeenth century. The joint first of these, *The Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* began in 1665, only sixty years after the Gunpowder Plot, and like Guy Fawkes, is still part of our culture.

Will there come a time when some subject bias collections consist only of electronic material? Many of my fellow delegates saw a demonstration of **Institute of Physics** electronic journals after the preconference here on Guy Fawkes night. We have also heard about **Academic Press’ IDEAL**, **Wiley’s InterScience**, the birth of an electronic file of some 200 journals from **Springer** and the development of **Elsevier Electronic Subscriptions** and **ScienceDirect**. Which one of these will be the model for the future? One of the reasons why publishers are building files of this kind is the inherent inefficiency of individual journals residing at individual Web sites. Alternatively alas, what could evolve is a move to a world of thousands of virtual and essentially invisible URLs, which may not be permanent and which require a different access procedure for each title.

Publishers as entrepreneurs do not traditionally cooperate with their competitors. Perhaps only **ADONIS** involving some sixty publishers and over 700 journals can be cited as a successful example of this kind of cooperation so far. The market of the early twenty-first century is likely to require large files of data by subject rather than relatively small parcels of information which to date have been neatly packaged as books and journals. Consequently, publishers need to join together in larger groups by acquisition, merger or alliances to meet this demand.

We have now come full circle and I need only conclude by telling you about the fate of the leader of the Gunpowder Plot. Folklore remembers only **Guy Fawkes** who was apprehended beneath the House of Lords on the 5th of November 1605, and has been burnt in effigy at the annual children’s firework parties every year since. The real leader of the plot, **Robin Catesby**, was shot while evading capture, by a posse led by the High Sheriff of Worcestershire on 8 November 1605. The plot and the shot brought his life to an end and he left no direct descendants. His brother, however, survived, and one of his descendants was the author of an important work on the natural history of the Carolinas published in the eighteenth century. **Mark Catesby** made two trips from London to the American colonies between 1710 and 1726 becoming America’s first naturalist and published his two volume work: *The Natural History of Carolina, Florida and the Bahama Islands* in 1731. The Charleston Museum across the block on Meeting Street has examples of his color plates on display. In closing, I should perhaps mention that today the pound sterling is worth less than three marks and very much less than two dollars. 